

India anti-satellite missile test a 'terrible thing,' NASA chief says

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(CNN)India's anti-satellite missile test created at least 400 pieces of orbital debris, the head of NASA says -- placing the International Space Station (ISS) and its astronauts at risk.

NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine said Monday that just 60 pieces of debris were large enough to track. Of those, 24 went above the apogee of the ISS, the point of the space station's orbit farthest from the Earth.

"That is a terrible, terrible thing to create an event that sends debris at an apogee that goes above the International Space Station," Bridenstine said in a live-streamed NASA town hall meeting. "That kind of activity is not compatible with the future of human spaceflight."

He added: "It is not acceptable for us to allow people to create orbital debris fields that put at risk our people."

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on March 27 that the country had achieved a "historic feat" by shooting down its own low-orbit satellite with a ground-to-space missile.

Only three other countries -- the US, Russia and China -- have anti-satellite missile capabilities.

India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement that the test was conducted in "the lower atmosphere to ensure that there is no space debris," and "whatever debris that is generated will decay and fall back onto the Earth within weeks."

But Bridenstine said the Indian test had increased the risk of small debris hitting the ISS by 44% over the 10 days immediately afterward.

"It's unacceptable, and NASA needs to be very clear about what its impact to us is," he added.

"We are charged with enabling more activities in space than we've ever seen before for the purpose of benefiting the human condition, whether it's pharmaceuticals or printing human organs in 3-D to save lives here on Earth,

or manufacturing capabilities in space that you're not able to do in a gravity well.

"All of those are placed at risk when these kind of events happen — and when one country does it, then other countries feel like they have to do it as well."

NASA is tracking 23,000 pieces of orbital debris 10 centimeters (almost 4 inches) or bigger.

A third of all debris cataloged by NASA was created in 2007, when China conducted an anti-satellite test, and in 2009 when American and Russian communications satellites collided.

However Bridenstine said India's test was conducted low enough that "over time, this (debris) will all dissipate," with the ISS and all astronauts on board safe.

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